

# THE AGES OF THE CINEMA CRITERIA AND MODELS FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF HISTORICAL PERIODS

XIV International Film Studies Conference  
Udine, March 20-22, 2007

*The construction of historical periods is something pervasive especially when one wishes to give events meaning, to encapsulate the flow of time, either in a progressive or regressive direction, in a linear or cyclical fashion – to combine the past and the present within a totality that might open itself up onto a future whose traits can be eventually forecast.*  
(K. Pomiań)

Framing historical phenomena means to assign chronological traits. Certain kinds of chronologies function as the “shared language” of history for populations and scientific circles. This “shared language” of history claims the right to label or come up with names for historical periods. The external language of historical periods derives from chronology which, in turn, offers a framework within which to situate historical phenomena. To organize film history according to historical periods helps us to think; alternatively, we end up studying only the kinds of histories that we are capable of thinking about. Over the years we have also understood that any kind of film history or any organization of historical periods, is, first and foremost, a historiographical gesture which involves philological foundations, documents, and arguments. In contemporary film studies, the use of decades such as “1920s” or “1930s,” to organize our knowledge has been very common. On the other hand, when we look at other chronological or historical, or theoretical, or historiographical levels frequently used in the study of cinema, we must acknowledge that our terminology is fairly incoherent. In certain cases we prefer a label about visual style (i.e. *film noir*) instead of a particular period marker. In short, history is complex and contradictory, hence we must understand that historical narratives always include that which cannot be said, proved or organized.

Historical Periods in Film Studies and the History of Period-Building in Art History, Literary History and Film History

Is it possible to determine shared and/or competing temporal systems across disciplines? And what is it that escapes from one discipline to another? Does it make sense to rely on broad institutional labels such as: classic, modern, post-modern? Should film

studies come up with new terms? What are the differences among period-building, chronology, and classification?

### Period-Building/Nation; Period-Building/Ideologies

According to either religious or revolutionary variables, a nation may develop an internal and self-sufficient system of period-building. These culturally specific systems are crucial in order to carry out research through newspapers, biographies etc, and in order to make decisions about dates. On the other hand, religious criteria for dates may differ from secular ones. Can we think of interesting overlaps or clashes among the competing ideologies of a single nation? Can these cases be of interest to film studies?

### Period-Building and Film Criticism

Film criticism has functioned as a catalyst of period-building, because the history of film criticism is based on definitions, selections, value-judgements, reflections, celebrations, explanations, connections, and, of course, amnesia, oversight, prejudices and biases. How has film criticism influenced period-building and how period-systems have influenced film criticism?

### Period-Building and Film Theories

Film theories developed around the debate on film as art form or on film as mass medium have further complicated the issue of period-building. Should film history and film theory be organized around auteurs, genres, and styles with the chronologies that these labels imply? Or should we rethink all these models in the light of terms such as school, movement, cine-club, tendency, wave, mass culture, visual studies, comparative arts?

### Technologies and Techniques in Relation to Period-Building

Although the history of cinema is fairly brief, the technological innovations and technical changes have been frequent. Think of lighter camera equipment, dubbing procedures, color processes, sound systems, formats ranging from cinemascope to dolby. In addition to technological changes at the level of the apparatus and technical solutions during film-making itself, the conditions of projection, screening, consumption and marketing have changed over time. In which ways, the histories of film production and reception have influenced period-building?

### Period-Building and Restoration

New developments in the histories of early cinemas due to archival discoveries and unprecedented restoration techniques, have changed our period-building approaches.

In which ways does the restoration of previously unknown films change our historical narratives about the century of the cinema?

### Period-Building and Cultural Typology

In some cases issues of cultural specificity determine the labels used and the time-spans adopted for film history. There are two major approaches: one is "essentialist" because it wants to stress the most "essential" qualities of a period; whereas, the second is "meta-linguistic" because it takes into consideration the institutions involved and looks at historical periods as ever-shifting categories.

### Period-Building Modernity/Postmodernity

Specialists of contemporary cinema engage in period-building, even if their histories are, by definition, open ended. Contemporary cinema operates within a set of profoundly new circumstances, due to economic globalization and digital technologies. Does it still make sense to talk about postmodern cinema? And what do we mean today with "modernity" in comparison to previous phases of film studies? Which new labels may be appropriate to use for the emerging media landscape?

### The Temporal Philosophy of the Cinema: Chronosophy

To interrogate ourselves about period-building in the cinema means to also explore philosophies of history (Benjamin, Deleuze, Frankfurt School, Agamben, Jameson, etc.). How does the history of the cinema relate to different conceptions of time? Which space does cinema occupy in relation to time? How does cinema dialogue with philosophical, religious, scientific models of time? What difference do space and movement make in the encounter of film, time and philosophy?

*Deadline for paper proposal: November 6, 2006*

For further information and contacts:  
 Dipartimento di Storia e Tutela dei Beni Culturali  
 Università degli Studi di Udine  
 Via Petracco 8  
 33100 Udine (Italy)  
 fax: +39/0432/556644 or +39/0432/556789  
 e-mail: [udineconference@gmail.com](mailto:udineconference@gmail.com)  
[www.damsweb.it/udineconference](http://www.damsweb.it/udineconference)